

Joint interview between novelists Ruth Downie and Harry Sidebottom...

HS: What made you become a novelist?

RD: To be honest I still don't think of myself as a novelist. Most of the writers I had to read for my English degree were brilliant, eccentric and dead. When I signed up for Creative Writing classes years later, I had no plans to join them. It was just an attempt to find a mental refuge from the needs of two small children and a job in Accounts. I'm still expecting the email that says, 'Sorry, but we've realised you aren't a proper writer after all. Please send back the advance.'

While I had nothing to lose, you're an academic as well as a novelist. Did you face any criticism from other academics for writing historical novels?

HS: None whatsoever. Maybe I would have twenty, thirty years ago. But now Classical scholars realise we have to reach out to the widest possible audience to keep the subject we love alive. Maybe we have all become more Continental. Italians did not castigate Umberto Eco for *The Name of the Rose*; Catalans did not turn on the poet Montalban when he published his Pepe Carvalho detective stories.

RD: It's all about firing the imagination, isn't it? A friend of mine has an ancient history degree because he was inspired by 'The Eagle of the Ninth' as a child. Which novelists have influenced you most?

HS: Different writers at different times. Among historical novelists probably Mary Renault and Patrick O'Brian. Now I can not get enough Cormac McCarthy; a literary novelist who does not shy away from action.

RD: On the basis that we're influenced by what we enjoy, Lindsey Davis is high on my list. If my memory were better I might have learned something from CJ Sansom, Martin Cruz Smith, Elmore Leonard, Paul Theroux, Joseph Heller... Please stop me. Ask another question.

HS: Do you think historical accuracy matters in a historical novel?

RD: Absolutely, although I'm aware that someone may be reaching for the keyboard right now to set me straight about something. I try to get things right, partly because a glaring inaccuracy can ruin the story for a reader who knows better, but mostly because doing the research is a delight. Having said that, sources on Roman Britain are limited. Greater minds than mine disagree on how to interpret them, which leaves a splendid amount of space for the imagination. You're not writing about Britain, though. When you write fiction do you come across any unexpected gaps in your knowledge?

HS: All the time, but they are not unexpected. Researching the novels takes me into areas I would not otherwise go; some big subjects like the Sassanid Persians or early Christianity, some small like what the Romans had for breakfast or how

to set about charcoal-burning; all fascinating. The novels have made me a better historian.

RD: I once tried trampling barefoot on a bunch of grapes in a washing-up bowl in the interests of research. They were unpleasantly slimy. More seriously, do you think fiction has anything to contribute to our understanding of the past, or is it purely entertainment?

HS: A well researched novel tells you about the past. But it can be more than that. Mary Renault said something like the interest in historical fiction comes from the gap between what is specific to a time and place and what is universal to the human condition. Opening up that gap, playing around with it, shows the things we take as natural are nothing of the sort; big things like relations between men and women. A seriously good historical novel encourages us to reflect on ourselves.

RD: That's interesting. What drew me to the Romans was reading the statement that 'Roman soldiers were not allowed to marry, but they were allowed to have relationships with local women.' I wanted to know what would have happened to the women, who have largely vanished from history.

HS: The relationship between Ruso and Tilla is at the heart of your books. Do you think women are better at writing about relationships?

RD: Hmm... and are men better at action? And at explaining how things work? I think we write best about what we're interested in. I've just read Andrew Taylor's 'The Barred Window,' which is a perceptive and chilling dissection of a family. I don't think a woman would have done it better.

HS: What can you tell us about your next book?

RD: It's called Ruso and the Root of All Evils. Ruso goes home to southern Gaul to deal with a domestic crisis, and finds himself accused of poisoning the family's chief creditor. There are gladiators, politics, wine, religion, snakes and a very small amount of shopping.

HS: Did you travel to the south of France to do research?

RD: Several times. In the interests of accuracy, you understand. The story sprang from a trip to the amphitheatre at Nimes - the maze of staircases and corridors behind the seating is the ideal setting for a chase scene. Speaking of which... if the Warrior of Rome novels were filmed, ideally who would you like to play Ballista?

HS: Javier Bardem. He is my alter ego. When I was young I had four ambitions. I wanted to be an Oxford don, a novelist, play Rugby for my country, and be a film star. I somehow managed the first two, but the Spaniard nailed the latter two. Ballista has to look tough, big and battered - not Hollywood pretty boy.

RD: The next `Warrior of Rome` novel is `Lion in the Sun`, and you have been commissioned to write three more. Would you ever consider writing novels set in another period, or a non-historical novel?

HS: The period just after the death of Alexander the Great has always interested me. His successors had helped him conquer the known world; now he was dead and they had to work out what to do with it. A series of novels set then would be fun. And at some point I certainly want to do a contemporary novel - probably set in one of the two worlds I know best, horse racing and Newmarket, or academe and Oxford.

RD: I'm rather fond of the Anglo-Saxons. They always seemed too glum to be entertaining, but the discovery of the vast hoard of bling in Staffordshire has improved their image enormously.

HS: We're almost out of time here. How would you sell your novels in ten words or less?

RD: Er – how about `Exasperated Roman Doctor challenged by murder, medics and women'? Your turn.

HS: `Ballista, Warrior of Rome: Hard Action, High Scholarship, Low Humour.'

RD: I knew yours would be better than mine.